

Film as a Subversive Art Self-subversion

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Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1975) 327 pp. & biblio., index, illus. \$15.00.

A few years ago when leaving Paris, I shared some train space with a young Canadian couple who were celebrating the success of their business, a karate and judo school, with a vacation in France. In a matter of days they had seen the tourist's Paris that I'd avoided for two months. It was fascinating to hear of all the things I'd missed (especially their standard diet of steak, lobster, and roast beef). The high point of the trip had come the night before: a tour of 5 or 7 or 9 nightclubs. They recounted it in great detail with the innocent enthusiasm unique to children and to North Americans in Europe, even the production of a nude "Camelot" at the Lido which ended the tour. ("Even the sword fights were nude?" my companion asked them.) The tour had started at a third-rate place, which turned out to have the most shocking show: it included an act of lesbian lovemaking. "Some of the people with us were really grossed out," they explained, "but it was really done in very good taste."

I start with this story because, pun aside, it presents the basic predicament of Amos Vogel's *Film as a Subversive Art*. Can form subvert content, can content subvert form, can either or both subvert the audience, how, when, why, for whom, and does it really matter? Vogel is convinced that it does matter, and I'm inclined to agree with him, which is why I wanted to review the book. But after reading it, I'm not sure that he's got a handle on the question at all.

Form subverting content is as old as parody and irony, which is to say it's a very ancient business. And the question of content subverting the audience has been on the aesthetic agenda since Plato endorsed state censorship in the *Republic*. More recently, and in the world of film,

various British film critics have tried to argue a case for Douglas Sirk (MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, WRITTEN ON THE WIND, IMITATION OF LIFE, etc.) on the grounds that his stylized form subverts his sugary sentimentalism, though strict auteurists seem to be the only Americans who can swallow that idea. And, of course, the form/ content/ subversion question animates a great deal of discussion of militant political film and the avant-garde. So, the questions at the heart of Vogel's book are really very important ones, and are basic to the liveliest issues being debated today in film criticism. Questions we face go from "What is a positive image of women in Hollywood film?" and "What is Michael Snow trying to do with film?" to "What is a revolutionary political cinema?"

What Vogel delivers to this ongoing discussion is a magnificently illustrated, extremely comprehensive survey glued together with a tissue of contradictory analysis. We have subversion of form: the Soviet 1920s, expressionism, surrealism, dada, pop, (mostly silent) comedy, and a heavy dose of the international avant-garde. Then we have the subversion of content: Godard, Third World, Eastern Europe, and Nazi cinema. On to forbidden subjects: sex, birth, death, religion. And a final mushy celebration of the counterculture and "the eternal subversion":

"In the last analysis, every work of art, to the extent that it is original and breaks with the past instead of repeating it, is subversive."

So what else is new?

Vogel has a very wide acquaintance with films, both orthodox and experimental, and a lively interest in the new and unusual. Politically his heart is in the right place (he comes out and says Hiroshima and Vietnam are cases of genocide). But it's never clear exactly what he means by "subversive" except that it helped him string together a book on films he obviously liked. It is clear he has an endless capacity for swallowing things at more than face value (e.g., an actress walking upside down in 2001's gravityless spaceship "opens us to a sense of cosmic consciousness"), and idealism (e.g., the "eternal tension between organized society and creative artist"). And at this late date he still refers to women as girls and can't seem to connect the depiction of women as objects and victims with female oppression except on the rarified (and therefore basically irrelevant) level of taboo.

It's hard to tell what motivated this book, especially because Vogel's analysis itself is such an intellectually mixed bag. In the same paragraph he mentions the decline of capitalist civilization (Marx) and the collective unconscious of the race (Jung). Vogel has a subject matter, but no consistent thesis, and he never comes to terms with the contradictions of jumbling different thinkers. But whatever the book's intention, it must be considered in its effect (though with an evasive

apology Vogel tries to confuse the issue by offering, “this book is an approximation of a draft of a first edition”—a statement worthy of Ron Ziegler). At last glance, precisely because the analysis is so thin, it’s another coffee table film book. With its Random House imprint, well-executed design, and lots of stills, it’s just a high class version of a sleazo porn publication, “The Making of DEEP THROAT” or “Modern Marriage Techniques Illustrated,” with a veneer of commentary to dress up the action. Basically this is your 1975 version of the Hollis Alpert-Arthur Knight *Playboy* series, “Sex in the Cinema.”

Maybe Vogel’s apology means something. Maybe he had to pay off a gambling debt or something in a hurry and churned out a potboiler ... or maybe he was just getting the money to do the book he could do. But we don’t need apologies, what we need is the solid piece of intellectual work he’s capable of. As the book stands now, it simply subverts itself: it’s slick, but trash nonetheless.

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